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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role of developmental or remedial education in higher education. Some students enroll in developmental courses because they are reentering college after many years out of a classroom. Others are recent high school graduates seeking better study skills and yet others are students lacking required course work from high school and those scoring below set criteria on standardized tests. Institutions usually do not expend much on these courses though they collect full tuition since the faculty assigned to teach developmental courses are often graduate assistants or adjunct faculty and are rarely trained in adult education. Additionally, students are frequently misplaced in these courses by ill-informed counselors. As these courses usually do not count toward graduation, enrollees cannot complete their education in a timely manner and must extend beyond the traditional 4 years. Students in these courses have been shown to score at lower intelligence levels than other students and to lack maturity. These findings suggest that many students are being encouraged to attend college before they are ready or even when not qualified. The field of developmental or remedial education is growing but questions still remain. There is concern that such education is not appropriate for higher education and that it represents a "dumbing down" of American education that will have serious future effects. (JLS)

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Developmental/Remedial Education in Higher Education : Dilution of the Mission ??

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Running Head : Dilution

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of developmental/remedial education in higher education. Issues regarding developmental education will be discussed and the appropriateness of "developmental" education and "remedial" education will be reviewed relative to the mission of higher education.

In colleges and universities across America, there are "developmental" classes and "remedial" classes in most institutions of higher education. It is difficult to trace the development of said remedial classes and to ascertain their growth, but it is safe to say that most colleges offer some types of classes that attempt to prepare students for college, help them to "brush up" on their skills or to basically review what should have been learned in high school. In certain instances, what should have been learned was forgotten, and in other instances, what "should" have been learned was never taught.

Developmental and remedial classes often do serve a positive purpose. A student who may have been in the military for 20 years and who wants to return for his/her college degree may certainly benefit from "refresher" courses. They may have done poorly in math in high school and need to review the basics of algebra or geometry. In other instances, term paper writing skills may have deteriorated over the years and the mechanics of grammar, style and referencing and citation may need review.

In other instances, however, a recent high school graduate may be encouraged to take a class in "Study Skills" which may encompass note taking, test taking, time management and other skills designed to help him or her with the prospect of becoming a full time college student.

In still other instances, a student may be mandated to take a MATH 100 class, because for some reason, the student never took a math class in high school. The reasons for that may vary and be legitimate, or be highly suspect. (One student in a developmental/remedial class did confess that they had never passed their G.E.D. but had simply signed up for college classes and their high school graduation was never checked. They finished their college degree without having ever graduated from high school or receiving their G.E.D.)

Some universities mandate developmental/remedial classes based on ACT or SAT scores. Thus, if a student receives a score of 5 on the math portion of the ACT, he or she must take a developmental or remedial class in arithmetic or preparatory math.

There is no clear definition as to "developmental or remedial" education, nor is there a clear body of procedural knowledge. The instructors responsible for the courses may or may not do any pre or post testing, nor are they always trained in this particular type of educational endeavor.

Often graduate students are assigned to teach these courses, or retired teachers who may not be prepared to teach adults who are returning to education.

There are several concerns relative to developmental/remedial education. Each concern will be addressed relative to the mission of higher education.

First, it is obvious that colleges and universities want all students to succeed for both academic and fiscal reasons. Unfortunately, if colleges and universities water down the curriculum and provide bogus programs to attract students, the ultimate mission of the university may be subjugated. Majors in "university studies" are so poorly defined, and so liberally accommodated, students are given a college degree for four years of college courses in any number of disciplines or fields of endeavor.

Second, the necessity to remediate reading, writing, mathematics and English skills has increased in proportion to the number of students encouraged to acquire a post secondary education. Promotion of community and junior college as a means to compete in society today has increased the number of previously academically "unqualified" candidates. It then falls upon educational institutions to accept these candidates and then bring them to a level which should increase their opportunities for a successful completion of their college level programs.

Third, some students enrolled in remedial courses don't need the courses, but they are enrolled by well meaning counselors whose resources of knowledge about any given student may be only a test score. Nontraditional students are particularly vulnerable to a counselor's suggestion to enroll in remedial courses, particularly reading and English for the sole purpose of enabling these students to readjust

to academia. Although some of these students were happy to be in a low stress environment, many didn't need reading or English, and some were surprised, and then disappointed (if not upset) that they were not going to get any credit on their degree plan for the remedial courses. Students who were taking three or four remedial courses and were carrying fifteen hours have discovered (much to their dismay) that most of their effort wasn't even counted toward their degree.

Fourth, graduate assistants and adjunct faculty handle many of the remedial classes; therefore, community colleges and universities are not expending much in terms of cost, but they are collecting full tuition. This is a win-win situation : the institutions get a steady stream of potential students, "unqualified" or poorly qualified candidates get an opportunity to succeed in post secondary education ! However, the missions of universities and two year colleges differ dramatically in regard to the respective emphasis on teaching and research, particularly with regard to the faculty.

A far greater percentage of teachers in the community colleges are adjunct faculty that are drawn from the area secondary schools and also from the retired educator population.

With the greater adjunct faculty and teaching to a broader segment of the population, it is significantly more appropriate for community colleges to be the focal point for postsecondary remedial education. Their mission should be,(and in many cases is), to prepare students to function in the world of work and life and also to prepare them for additional undergraduate work.

"Win-win" situations are attractive, but the differences in missions of universities, colleges and two year colleges regarding teaching and research suggests that the universities risk dilution of their efforts to focus on the cutting edge of knowledge, information and technology by offering remedial education to academically unqualified candidates. Once students take a developmental or remedial class, they may expect future classes to be also simplified or "watered down" as many remedial classes are.

For older adults, college programs such as "Elderhostel" try to provide for academic and intellectual stimulation while making a profit and providing a service to the aging community.

In any discussion about remedial education at the college level, the question arises "Why is remedial education necessary at the college level, and is college the appropriate arena for this education?". Students who do

well in remedial education, indicate that they did not feel the course was necessary, while failure in these classes does not seem to be indicative of instructor incompetence or difficulty of subject matter, but often rather a function of student apathy or other concerns.

Some of the other concerns may include the fact that the student has an undiagnosed handicap, such as some type of learning disability or may even be emotionally unprepared for college.

Research by Reed, Makarem, Wadsworth and Shaughnessy (1994) has revealed that "developmental and remedial" students are often both intellectually and socially unprepared for college. Using a brief intelligence test, they found the developmental students averaged about one standard deviation below average. Of greater concern was the fact that on a measure of psycho-social development, most were not near adolescence developmentally.

Follow up research by Shaughnessy and Moore (1994) using a full intelligence test again found that developmental students were one standard deviation below a comparison group of freshmen, and almost two standard deviations below advanced placement class students.

Several reasons for student failure at the remedial level of learning are apparent. First, financial aid considerations are relevant. Many students simply do not have the money for books, food, tuition, housing and related

expenses, and have to work part time, thus taking time away from the learning process.

Second, individuals do not want to perceive themselves as failures; therefore they blame the instructor, subject matter, time of day etc., instead of their own lack of ability of interest.

A third case of failure on the student's part may be associated with what is termed "alternative ways" to solving problems and dealing with colleges and instructors. One example is in the area of math. Some students from secondary schools have sadly learned (mistakenly) improper methods of solving mathematical problems, especially in respect to fractions and decimals.

When these students are shown the correct way to solve these problems, they consider it an alternative way only, and continue to solve the problems in the incorrect way. Interestingly, most students do their homework assignments using the correct way of solving the problems, but revert to the old incorrect methods on the exams.

Many feel that remedial education at the college level is inappropriate, ineffective and costly, both in time and money. There is precious little research regarding the effectiveness of these programs and long term follow up.

Once college entrance requirement standards are set, those individuals who do not meet the requirements should be advised to seek remedial education elsewhere (perhaps at the two year college or community college, for their benefit as

well as the benefit of their peers and society).

One concern regarding "developmental" and "remedial" courses is the time needed for the student to graduate. Some student spend their entire first semester enrolled in remedial math, writing, English, reading and "college prep" classes. Thus, they are generally unable to finish in the typical four year period. Indeed, many students are needing five years to finish college, and even more if they decide to change their major or minor!

Is developmental/remedial education is crucial part of "higher education"? If by higher education we mean advanced education beyond what is required by high school, we must respond that developmental/remedial classes are not a crucial part of higher education. They may play a supplementary role, but not a crucial part. Perhaps of more importance is to discern why so few high school students are taking the courses necessary to prepare them for college. And why are high schools allowing students to graduate with only one year of math ?

Perhaps college courses should all be set up so that every student that signs up for a class has the prerequisite knowledge, is able to attend each class, learn the material in the class and pass that class at an acceptable level of scholarship.

Summary and Conclusions

The field of developmental/remedial education is growing, but still, some suspicions remain. There is some concern among many that said classes are not appropriate and they contribute to the "dumbing down" of American education. If developmental classes are allowed to permeate American education, high school students may well begin to feel that they can prepare for college in college!

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